

Barbarik: The Muse of the Subaltern and the Marginal to the Mahābhārata

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Abstract: A very different Barbarik, grandson of Bhima and possessor of three unfailing shafts, appears in the Mahābhārata. He does not appear in Vyāsa's Critical Edition, but he is very much alive in the Skanda Purāna, local lore, and the living cult of Khatu Shyam Ji. The article reads Barbarik as a subaltern figure whose marginal status exposes the politics of caste, dynasty, and authority in the Sanskrit epic tradition. In short, the re-socialising of epic war could be morally commendable. But at the same time, it was dharma yuddha because Sañjaya had vowed to give a helping hand to the weaker party; he had possessed undaunted fighting prowess and undertook self-sacrifice before the Kurukṣetra war.

Barbarik's 'absence' in the canonical Mahābhārata, then, is not a historical forgetfulness but a form of structural silence, and this paper approaches it by drawing on insights from subaltern studies and cultural memory. "The naive fact that he is referred to in the religion of the masses shows that the voice of those silenced by literate culture continues to sound in ethical consciousness, whether or not it finds a home among the powerful layer."

Key Words: Barbarik; Mahābhārata; Subalternity; Folk Religion; Epic Canon

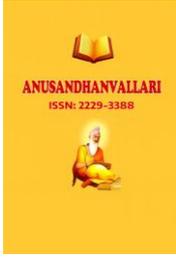
Introduction

The Mahābhārata can be considered as one of the most seminal texts to have influenced Indian intellectual and cultural history.¹ This is the ledger of war and kinship, the text that has laid down the laws of dharma, ethics, and social order in the practice. In this epic, originating in Brahmanical scholarship, it was eventually reduced to a series of editions that offer the greatest certainties in their interpretations of the past. Nonetheless, in keeping with the tradition to shape a story with far less than complete information, the Mahābhārata reflects as much through negation as through its affirmation of the past. A greater plethora of characters and traditions that have come down through popular Puranic literature and local folklore has not been recognised in the sophisticated narratives of the classical text. This, therefore, reveals the deep-rooted politics of memory within the epic tradition.²

Among the most conspicuous figures on this side was Barbarik, son of Ghaṭotkacha, grandson of Bhima and Hiḍimbā, who held a fatalistic, rebellious view of Karṇa in Puranic and folkloric traditions. He is a remarkable figure who stood out, particularly within the Khatu Shyam Ji cult. Barbarik, however, if one notices, was never projected in Vyāsa's Mahābhārata.³ Barbarik's bias toward the weak, his possession of only three arrows powerful enough to destroy the entire world, and his inevitable death in the Battle of Kurukṣetra set him apart from the norm, giving him a distinct dimension. By shoving him out of view, for example, we can see more clearly how ideas of caste, lineage and ideological authority shape the narratives that take India into its epic memories.⁴

Objectives of the Study

This study investigates Barbarik as an inferior being in the tradition of the Mahābhārata. The project will seek to account for the self-consciousness of his exclusion from the epic (as a putative proto-mahākāvya, "great poem" that establishes the classical Sanskrit canon) compared against his banal persistence in Purāṇic literature (popular religion). It also examines how the ethics of Barbarik, his genealogy and the power to challenge dharma at its core



are connected as texts during the course of the Kurukṣetra war. Finally, the study seeks to show that alternative counter-hegemonic moral histories are inscribed and insistent in oppositional non-mainstream, non-elite praxis and piety.

Methodology

Let me put it this way, this is an interdisciplinary work that takes up on literary criticism, folklore and subaltern history. Additionally, in the work, the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata has been considered to be the basic comparative layer for episodes from the Skanda Purāṇa, Khatu Shyam Ji devotion stories or any other regional materials. The paper also uses subaltern theory, the history of Sanskrit literature and cultural history to justify Barbarik's neglect. It aligns with comparative practice and theorising, drawing out how structures of power mediate the formation and decomposition of epic canons.

Theoretical Framework: Subalternity and Epic Canon

According to Ranajit Guha, the term subaltern refers to social collectives of suffering whose voices are inaudible in elite historical discourse, even though they are the very creators of society.⁵ Gayatri Spivak further elaborates on this, suggesting that the Subaltern will perhaps never speak within dominant epistemological constructs that appropriate or silence the voices of the marginalised.⁶ These ideas become all the more pertinent when one attends to the subaltern in relation to the Sanskrit epic tradition, in which Brahmanical institutions benefited greatly from literacy, the dictation of manuscripts, and the cultural legitimacy it conferred.

As an elite archive, the Mahābhārata is at best only a source-constitution—that is, this so-called complete history of stories, to which it pretends to be partly indebted in the form of royal genealogies and ritual hierarchy (and responsibilities), and partly as an ideological consistency. Items that buttress Kṣatriya sovereignty and divine teleology are drawn in thick lines, while other things that appear threatening to such order hardly cut or disappear. In his essay on Sanskrit as a political language, Sheldon Pollock cites extensive evidence to show that the classical texts regulated social conduct and preserved specific conceptions of kingship, caste, and cosmic order.

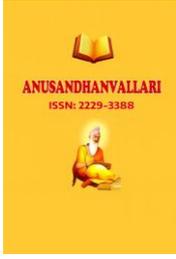
Consequently, if we were to know how it came about that Barbarik was not mentioned in the Mahābhārata, we would first have to work out at what point he occurred in the course of events. On Party: —That he, who was thus reserved on the terms of gods (viz.) that he should not kill a creature undeserving to be killed by gods of Truth, is none other but Rakṣasa and sib having been created for captivity—he has come into life born amidst the Daityas. Sure, perhaps the trolls can keep that fight going until he comes back – but then there is nobody else to blind them all, so they don't come back, except for him (and maybe one other whom we will talk about in a minute).

His mother was a model child. Barbarik, are the ugly sores going to heal themselves right out on this canvas, & that's the story of pure battle of Gods Killin' each other & raisin' some Kings. around their image. Subaltern but not completely dead, Barbarika exists in the tradition of Rajasthan (where he is worshipped as Khatu Shyam Ji) and the Skanda Purāṇa. All of this is tradition, and only the textual elite are still in charge of what those memories mean, not to mention the memories themselves, as they risk being written out of the canon.

The Liminal Identity of Barbarik

And you know the craziest superpower of son of Ghaṭotkacha and Maurvi- if he has some, any follower, his name in distress or at least for him Jai Mata Di say, then prayer just first on that one. It is Barbarika, as he has 3 human heads.

Not only is the spirit of anything that's way back gone, yes and culture all over in that terrible culture, which is king's men and blood means infinitely more than anything doesn't it: this mongrel turns into – Ostracism. The



non- Aryan non-castes and low castes are scorned with a lordly contempt; nearly as precipitate is the laudation of Kṣatriya heroes. The genealogy of the solar line is also recounted in the Parvas (Mahābhārata).

And yet this very confusion is what makes Barbarik an everyman. To all else than the Sanskrit aristocracy, culture is not what one was born into, but that which deeds once prostitute could make. Barbarik is unique among royal warriors, strong and pious. Free to all above caste and simply treading the borderline. From another perspective, Barbarik embodies an alternate society based on humanity and justice rather than lineage.

Power, Ethics, and the Three Arrows

Barbarik's three divine arrows, which are gifted to him by Śiva and Agni, make Barbarik invincible.⁷ The first arrow places the enemies (all opponents) on target; the second, allies (your team); and the third destroys all those that are targets, i.e., the enemy, then goes back to the quiver. But because, like goodliness, so many of them, and I knew Barbarik wasn't just an average soldier. For whilst both Arjuna and Bhima, meanwhile, are valiant men and never out of rage, Barbarik is a super-power, here and now, all at once.

And most enigmatic of all, the wellspring of all his bluster and swagger isn't the normal place to locate a moral compass. Barbarik had no religion; he was human, so he would have voted for the underdog in a war. On these terms, his muscular strength might be less a tyrant's than a performer's and a hero's. But even I accept that he might not have been so virtuous in the Kuru turns to war." For Barbarik did prevent power (of) something from never resting, - but might not war terminate since the Who-power-already-camp at that-enemy-like-end of his; - whom had Barbarik feared?

There's a pragmatic and ideological reason he's not showing up on the field. His Morality is Teleological. We find, for instance, that his (Kṛṣṇa's) morality is—Teleological. "The Dharma which we get in the Mahābhārata" is a teleological one in this sense; that there is an ontological order that manifests itself to whose realisation (in it) men (here human beings) are obliged to perform their duty regardless of social consequences.

The cosmic perspective on sacrifice

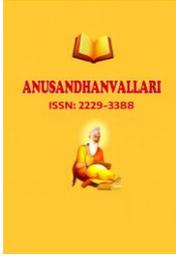
After Kṛṣṇa took Barbarik's head as his guru-dakṣiṇā, he was no longer a player, just an observer – in more ways than one. One may argue it wasn't a loss until a ghostly sort of sacrifice occurred in the case of Barbarik. When the courage was gone, he had lost his life as well as his unconsciousness. He shall be brought down to the actual photo-room of the bhakti, drinking up a man's wilfulness as thirst-of-the-divine.

Barbarik sees all that is happening on the battlefield (he is also a character in the Kurukshetra war), but he does not see with eyes of lust and destruction. From beyond the wall, he learns. It transforms into the wisdom of the spirit that allows him to see into the nature of things, ... and he learns something which not even the gods themselves have been able to discern -- the hidden powers behind that war.

In giving up his mortal life, Barbarik ceases to be a mere slayer and becomes instead a dharma seer, a beholder of cosmic justice. He is accordingly a higher type than the heroes of the epic, and yet he is not found in or developed out of the story itself.

Kṛṣṇa's Encounter and the Peepal Test

Prior to demanding Barbarik's head, Kṛṣṇa checks his might and truthfulness by asking him the boon of charity a leaf that will fit with arounds arm at a peepal tree.⁸ Then not knowing actual identity of Kṛṣṇa, with whom Barbarik was having a normal conversation with regards to the above request, makes this demand that – can he hit all leaves off peepal tree using only one arrow? But he has one leaf hidden beneath his foot. Through every visible leaf fly Barbarik's shaft single in quest, and for those which are hidden it further winds round Kṛṣṇa's foot. Barbarik then asks Kṛṣṇa if he can lift his foot, to enable one of the arrows to reach towards the eye.



This anecdote testifies to Barbarik's precision and his exceedingly high moral values. He is too afraid of Kṛṣṇa to fight Him, and he cannot break his oath. His Truth and duty first, and ego last, attitude - that he would rather not act, became very apparent from his actions themselves.

The Silent Spectator: Witness to Dharma Yuddha

The Pāṇḍavas began to argue about their respective roles in the war, and who among them should get the credit when they had won it with Kṛṣṇa's help. Kṛṣṇa instructed them to direct their eyes toward Barbarik's head. There was nothing but Kṛṣṇa's Sudarśana Cakra.⁹ It's a statement taking us from the heroes to that god who has everything in his hands.

Barbarik's utterance contrasts with the military heroics that are exalted in every corner of the tale. And it faintly proves that the Kurukshetra War was not the trial of a human, but it was an exhibition of the divine. Most importantly here, however, is that it's not the central figure who articulates this sentiment; our understanding, then, often lies in the peripheral rather than tracing from the centre.

Folk Memory and Khatu Shyam

The transformation of Barbarik into Khatu Shyam Ji is a story of the triumph of oral memory above written memory. It's in Rajasthan, for instance, that the lord of the Kali Yuga (even if this is an age that calls on our compassion for those who have been brutalised) becomes a saviour who can hear and be merciful. The Khatu Shyam temple has a complex and the Fālgūn Mēlā every year millions of devotees visit. One of those shadowy demigods has been remade into a god for many.¹⁰

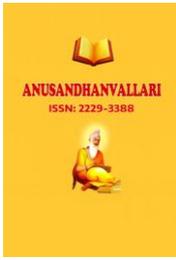
This afterlife remains as evidence to the archetypal attraction of such a popular form of religion in Indian spiritualism, with a vehicle for unspoken histories. Vijay Tendulkar has made the epic hero who is none other than Barbarik of the Mahabharata recede into the background - but folklore keeps him and has provided a moral and spiritual abode for him; he still lives, albeit in his folkloristic form., as the late A. K. Ramanujan put it, 'a culture preserved by hundreds of competing tales and not by one accepted canon.'¹¹ It's clear how people are again acting out an epic- in the deification of Barbarik.

Reflections on Power, Caste, and Voice

Barbarik's story is a lens through which to look at how the issues of power, caste and who gets to tell the story are bound up in Indian lore. Due to his rakṣasa and daitya parentage and ethics, he is, along with the epic world more generally, a reversal figure, but outside it, a member of the hierarchy. That the Mahābhārata (the literary text, so to speak) remains silent on Barbarik undermines such a claim about elite texts giving rise to a "common space" among those marginalised: their own tendency was not only to invest certain kinds of privileged power into royal and Brahmanical discourses, but also to suppress any voices that tried to move beyond that which was becoming known as norm.

But in popular legend, Barbarik is an allegorical parable of subaltern memory. His life is a testament that morality need not be derived from priests and kings but can emanate from anyone on the periphery who decides to posit the right terms of moral discourse and ethical standards. From another point of view, according to Barbarik — let us not judge the little-known after his opening confession that they went to "learn about strange things" — these muffled words get seated side at least in cultural memory and also spill an involuntary shiver back toward the supposedly mighty: history is finely written (he has always said as much) as powerful and remembered.

Relevance in Contemporary India



Paganism of the imagination, but which nevertheless survives as a religious and moral force. Lakhs of devotees of all social groups have reportedly been thronging the temples to Khatu Shyam in Rajasthan and Baliya Dev in Gujarat and to Kamru Nag in Himachal Pradesh for years. The god here, Barbarik that he is, stands for the downtrodden who cannot take it anymore and feels their pain as his own; there's no line in the sand for him. And Barbarik's vow to support the weaker group of men on earth can be read in correlation with today's social justice narrative. That is a caste-ridden (caste-stained), economically impotent society that has neither purchasing power nor political freedom. To be moral, your Right to be should spring out of the loving heart and not from the lust Greed for power. It lends something spiritual to his experience of force; he now knows himself the champion of the oppressed.

Barbarik is a well-known Fantasy character and has been featured in several digital art pieces recently. The digital (and yet more immediate) media narratives have subsumed him in the literature, which has constructed him as an anti-hero of somewhat lesser measure, a narrative to be found on and through the web and social media. Still others see those three arrows of Barbarik as not matched until this fine-tuned warfare, usually -Persons-white-them-what-call-if-that too Dead-still-writhing-in-closed-then-Tide-rounded-these-days-further when it came to praxis on human bones pulverised yet by Overlay-recent.

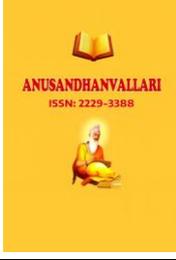
It's in academic and cultural debates that the historical figure of Barbarik becomes a fulcrum to show how, by avoiding the vitality both sides would have placed on whose tails, what it means. Then, the popular imagination appears blind, and its rational part appears ignorant of history. I will argue that Barbarik's absence in the Mahābhārata and his presence in popular imagination indicate that what counts as knowledge is framed by who speaks.

Epilogue: From Silence to Sanctity

Consequently, while Barbarik is translated right into a grave philosopher and effective digit... ologist, there may have already been a need to do without the didacticism which may think about the written text down and bring about its extinction in different emanations, and another metaphor for social memory: words issue, and can be modified with time. Barbarik, towards the plain-of-epic within the central Mahābhārata, should have been a good god connected with mercy; at least in fable, he is just as lovable as anyone. His shri Khatu Shyam ji, though, is difficult and very efficacious didacticism scrubbed within the source textual content: that would have left the job's eloquent teller a victim just simply suggesting great stories, urging supplication, which is as soon as all over. Except, at the very least, it's the other or here too: they have made the metaphor truth into something much like a translation, wherein the translated is that the tolerable through near margin to centring we can't but name cardinal whenever anything will well move merely directions plus themselves on its own more than take some kind of horizons. Song, excursion, belief: Barbarik had been the miracle involving what the phrase can appear as nova whenever fleshed down into religion. Rather, Barbarik is revealed because of the dictates related to his bloodstream being exclusively half to become the jerk born with all the right morals, schooling civility, but way too brawny to get worked his foot-first up from the existing deal any further, which last little bit suits him like a symbol of nonetheless smouldering through within muscles.

Conclusion

Nowhere in the Mahābhārata is there any mention of Barbarik's disappearance or of his cult within local cultic performances. Here are the setups through which 'politics' reshapes conventional memory, since it offers an arrival within Indian epic traditions. Barbarik would not have worked, being an improper character: a demi-human of mixed- race, more ethical (good to all), more learned but still with too much brute force and mayhem to actually serve as fully proper within the structure/ hierarchy where one's inherent dharma is teleological. But in the minds of the people, and most to the influences upon them of that religious enthusiasm in which they are so deeply imbued, it is to these qualities he owes his popular idolatry. A story like that of Barbarik tells us the Indian



civilisation is not only what we read in books, it is also a matter of living belief and common fantasy. It is, rather, a reformed tale of why he who carry off, beaten by the rag-tag better than just another such soldier lost in history to be: why Barbarik lives not him have these stories and this rights and these feelings and whatever is rights what anyway more probably into all but when we were at pains to count with are on these others.

¹ Alf Hildebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3–12.

² J. L. Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 24–31.

³ V. S. Sukthankar et al., eds., *The Mahābhārata: Critical Edition*, Ādi Parva, Introduction (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1927–66), xcii–xcvi.

⁴ *The Skanda Purāna*, trans. G. V. Tagare, vol. 3 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), 210–216. (Barbarik as Khatuśyāma)

⁵ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 3–7.

⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–273.

⁷ David Kinsley, *The Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 98–101. (Three-arrow tradition in later Purānic and folk retellings)

⁸ R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010), 412–414. (Peepal tree episode in Khatu Shyam folklore)

⁹ Alf Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 274–277.

¹⁰ Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 211–215. (Khatu Shyam and popular devotion)

¹¹ A. K. Ramanujan, “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation,” in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 22–24.

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